

Lincoln's Mystery Story
1846

DRAWER 3

Manuscript - Springfield

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Abraham Lincoln before 1860

Lincoln's Mystery Story, 1846

Excerpts from newspapers and other
sources

From the files of the
Lincoln Financial Foundation Collection

A Mystery Story by Abraham Lincoln

Abraham Lincoln is famous for many things that he said and wrote, but did you know that he once wrote a mystery story? One of those true-detective-mystery story type that appear in magazines today?

Such a story, in fact, was written by young Lawyer Lincoln, long before he became the great President, and it has been discovered in the musty old files of the Quincy, Ill. Whig of April 15, 1846.

(In Illinois "Quincy" is pronounced "Quinsy.")

As Lincoln tells the story, four men went out for a walk one Spring day—and only three came back. It looked like murder all right and everything was set for a hanging when the victim turned up alive!

"It may well be doubted whether a stranger affair ever occurred," wrote Mr. Lincoln. He ought to have known; he was defense lawyer for the accused man.

This story was discovered in the Quincy paper by Roger W. Barrett of a Chicago family long interested in everything about Lincoln and was reprinted in the current Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine.

THE TRAILOR MURDER MYSTERY By Abraham Lincoln

IN THE year 1841, there resided, at different points in the state of Illinois, three brothers by the name of Trailor. Their Christian names were William, Henry and Archibald.

Archibald resided at Springfield, then as now the seat of government of the state. He was a sober, retiring, and industrious man, of about 30 years of age; a carpenter by trade, and a bachelor, boarding with his partner in business—a Mr. Myers. Henry, a year or two older, was a man of like retiring habits; had a family, and resided with it on a farm, at Clary's Grove, about 20 miles distant from Springfield in a northwesterly direction. William, still older, and with similar habits, resided on a farm in Warren County, distant from Springfield something more than 100 miles in the same northwesterly direction. He was a widower with several children.

In the neighborhood of William's residence, there was, and had been for several years, a man by the name of Fisher, who was somewhat above the age of 50; had no family, and no settled home; but who boarded and lodged a while here and a while there, with persons for whom he did little jobs of work. His habits were remarkably economical, so that an impression got about that he had accumulated a considerable amount of money.

In the latter part of May, in the year mentioned, William formed the purpose of visiting his brothers at Clary's Grove and Springfield; and Fisher, at the time having his temporary residence at his house, resolved to accompany him. They set out together in a buggy with a single horse.

On Sunday evening they reached Henry's residence, and staid over night.

On Monday morning, being the first Monday of June, they started on to Springfield, Henry accompanying them on horseback.

They reached town about noon, met Archibald, went with him to his boarding house, and there took up their lodgings for the time they should remain.

After dinner, the three Trailors and Fisher left the boarding house for the avowed purpose of spending the evening together in looking about the town.

At supper, the Trailors had all returned, but Fisher was missing, and some inquiry was made about him.

After supper, the Trailors went out professedly in search of him.

One by one they returned, the last coming in after late tea time, and each stating that he had been unable to discover anything of Fisher.

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To Find the Body Was the First Step

MYSTERY

Continued from the First Page

The next day, both before and after breakfast, they went probed in search again and returned at noon, still unsuccessful. Dinner again being late, William and Henry expressed a determination to give up the search, and start for their homes.

This was remonstrated against by some of the boarders about the house, on the ground that Fisher was somewhere in the vicinity, and would be left without any subsistence, as he and William had come in the same buggy.

The remonstrance was, however, a riot and they departed for their homes respectively.

Up to this time, the knowledge of Fisher's mysterious disappearance had spread very little beyond the few boarders at the house, and excited no considerable interest. After the lapse of three or four days, Henry returned to Springfield, for the ostensible purpose of making further search for Fisher.

Pursuing some of the boarders, he, together with them and Archibald, spent another day in ineffective search, which was again abandoned, and he returned home.

No general interest was yet excited.

On the Friday, week after Fisher's disappearance, the Postmaster at Springfield received a letter from the Postmaster nearest William's residence in Warren county, stating that William had returned home without Fisher, and was saying rather boastfully that Fisher was dead, and had walked him his money and that he had got about \$300 by it.

The letter further stated that William's story and conduct seemed strange, and desired the Postmaster at Springfield to ascertain and write what was the truth in the matter.

The Postmaster at Springfield made the letter public, and at once excitement became universal and intense. Springfield, at that time, had a population of about 3500, with a city organization. The Attorney General of the state resided there.

A purpose was forthwith formed to ferret out the mystery, in putting which into execution, the Mayor of the city and the Attorney General took the lead. To make search for, and, if possible, the body of the man supposed to be murdered, was resolved on as the first step.

In pursuance of this, men were formed into large parties, and marched abreast in all directions, so as to let no inch of ground in the vicinity remain unsearched.

Examinations were made of cellars, wells, and pits of all descriptions, where it was thought possible the body might be concealed.

All the fresh, or tolerably fresh graves in the graveyard were pried into, and dead horses and dead dogs were disinterred, where, in some instances, they had been buried by their portal masters.

This search has appeared commenced on Friday. It continued until Saturday afternoon without success, when it was determined to dispatch officers to arrest William and Henry at their residences, respectively.

The officers started on Sunday morning, meanwhile the search for the body was continued, and rumors got about of the Trailers, who were supposed to have been taken to Fisher.

On Monday, the officers sent for Henry, having arrested him, arrived at noon. The Mayor and Attorney General took charge of him and set their wits to work to elicit a discovery from him.

He denied and denied, and persisted in his denial, and called him in every conceivable way, but would say nothing, and would be left without any subsistence, as he and William had come in the same buggy.

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ABRAHAM LINCOLN, from a portrait made about 1848.

and indeed his personal security rendered it by no means objectionable to him.

And now came the search for the brush thicket, and the search of the mill pond. The thicket was found, and the buggy track at the point indicated. At a point within the thicket, the signs of a struggle were discovered, and a trail from thence to the buggy track was traced.

In attempting to follow the track of the buggy from the thicket, it was found to proceed in the point of the mill pond, but could not be traced all the way. At the pond, however, it was found that a buggy had been backed down to, and partially into the water's edge.

Search was now to be made in the pond, and it was made in every imaginable way. Hundreds and hundreds were engaged in raking, fishing, and draining. After much fruitless effort in this way, on Thursday morning the mill dam was cut down, and the water of the pond partially drawn off, and the same processes of search again gone through with.

About noon of this day, the officer sent for William, returned having him in custody and a man calling himself Dr. Gilmore, came in company with him.

It seems that the officer arrested William at his own house, early in the day on Tuesday, and started to Springfield with him; that after days' travel, they reached Lexington in Fulton County, where they stopped for the night.

Late in the night Dr. Gilmore arrived, stating that Fisher was alive at his house, and that he had followed on to give the information, so that William might be released without further trouble.

The officer, distrusting Dr. Gilmore, refused to release William, but brought him on to Springfield, and re-ascertained that Fisher was alive, and at his house. At this, the mul-

timore was again at its death.

Gilmore also stated that he had known Fisher for several years, and that he had ascertained he was subject to temporary derangement of mind, owing to an injury about his head received in early life.

The fact was about Dr. Gilmore so much of the air and manner of truth that his statement prevailed in the minds of the audience and of the court, and the Trailers were dis-

titude for a time, were utterly confounded.

Gilmore's story was communicated to Henry Trailor, who, without flinching, reaffirmed his own story about Fisher's murder.

Henry's admission to his own story, and his statement that he had known Fisher for several years, and that he had ascertained he was subject to temporary derangement of mind, owing to an injury about his head received in early life, was so much of the air and manner of truth that his statement prevailed in the minds of the audience and of the court, and the Trailers were dis-

tinged, although they attempted to explain the circumstances proven by the other witnesses.

On the next Monday, Henry arrived in Springfield, bringing with him the man named Fisher, in full view and proper jail on.

This ended this strange affair, in a whole of a country, and the writer of these notes could not find any more to say about it, and it is not the object of the writer of this to enter into the many curious speculations that might be indulged upon the facts of this narrative, yet he can scarcely forbear a remark upon what would almost certainly have been the fate of William and Archibald, had Fisher not been found alive.

It seems he had wandered away in mental derangement, and had he died in this condition, and his body found in the vicinity, it is difficult to conceive what could have saved the Trailers from the consequence of having murdered him.

Or, if he had died, and his body never found, the case against them would have been quite as bad, for although it is a principle of law that a conviction for murder shall not be had, unless the body of the deceased be discovered, it is to be remembered that Henry testified that he saw Fisher's dead body.

At this the prosecution rested.

Dr. Gilmore was then introduced by the defendants. He stated that he resided in Warren county, about seven miles distant from William's residence; that on the morning of William's arrest, he was out from home, and heard of the arrest, and of its being on a charge of the murder of Fisher; that on returning to his own house, he found Fisher there, that Fisher was in very feeble health, and could give no rational account as to where he had been during his absence; that he (Gilmore) then started in pursuit of the officer, as before stated, and that he should have taken Fisher with him, only that the state of his health did not permit.

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Weird Murder Mystery Moved Abe Lincoln to Write a Story

Abraham Lincoln, like many another eminent man, including the late Franklin D. Roosevelt, was a detective-story fan.

He rated Edgar Allan Poe's murder tales high in his reading.

But few people know that as a young Springfield lawyer Lincoln came up against a mystery so strange, so bizarre, so utterly baffling that it moved him to write a murder story of his own.

The little known story, "The Trailor Murder Mystery," the account of the Springfield mystery of 1841, appears exactly as Lincoln wrote it in the current issue of Ellery Queen's Mystery Magazine. It is reprinted from the pamphlet, "A Strange Affair," edited by Roger W. Barrett of Kenilworth and published in 1933.

Barrett, Chicago attorney for the Office of Price Stabilization and son of the late Oliver R. Barrett, famed collector of Lincolniana, published his historically important booklet after tracing the Lincoln mystery story to the files of the Quincy Whig of April 15, 1846.



THE THREE brothers were arrested and charged with Fisher's murder. Lincoln and his law partners, Logan and Baker, took up their defense.

Under prosecution pressure, Henry Trailor broke down and testified that his brothers William and Archibald had murdered Fisher and that he had stood guard while they dumped his body in a mill pond.

As Lincoln tells the story, a Dr. Gilmore brought about the freedom of the Trailors by testifying that Fisher had showed up at his house alive.

Later he produced Fisher "in full life and proper person."

Another account, in the "His-

tory of Sangamon County, Illinois, 1881," states that Fisher was brought to court before the trial ended.

AT ANY RATE, Lincoln writes near the end of his famous story, "Thus ended this strange affair and while it is readily conceived that a writer of novels could bring a story to a more perfect climax, it may well be doubted whether a stranger affair ever really occurred."

The whole matter remains a mystery to today, although Barrett and others have offered possible solutions, based upon Fisher's known tendency toward mental aberrations.

LINCOLN HIMSELF offered no solution.

Instead, he was concerned

with "what would, almost certainly have been the fate of William and Archibald, had Fisher not been found alive."

As Ward Lamon writes in his "Life of Lincoln":

"The circumstances impressed him very deeply with the insufficiency and danger of 'circumstantial evidence.'"

An ironic note is added to the whole tale by Barrett, who writes in his closing paragraph:

"In 1845, Logan & Lincoln secured a judgment of \$100 against the administrator of the estate for defending Archibald Trailor in the murder case, but, as with many of the unusual incidents in the case, the judgment still remains unsatisfied."

THE WHIG headlined the story "Remarkable Case of Arrest for Murder." In it Lincoln recounted the known facts concerning four men, Archibald, William and Henry Trailor, brothers, and Archibald Fisher, a frugal carpenter friend, who went out for a walk in Springfield on June 2, 1841.

Only the three brothers came back. They reported that Fisher had gone into a thicket and disappeared.

After a brief search, interest in Fisher's mysterious disappearance waned — until it became known that William and Archibald Trailor were passing out some mysterious gold pieces. It was suspected they might have belonged to Fisher.

